

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany: Matthew 5:1-12

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I don't know how many times we've talked about how the empire vs. the little guy is a theme in the Bible. Most of Biblical history takes place with the authors under the thumb of an outside empire. That's part of what made Constantine and the Roman Empire adopting Christianity such a huge moment. Without Rome, Christianity might've remained a regional sect or even died out! But when Christianity and Rome wed, Christianity rapidly spread. One considerable downside we've never fully reckoned with is that those texts written by oppressed people were adopted by the oppressing regime without changes. And so, the oppressors oppressed and claimed to be oppressed at the same time. If you've ever wondered how modern Christians can claim to be under constant threat, that's the root of it. That's something I've known intellectually. That's something I've preached about. That's something I was poisoned by and continue to reckon with in my faith. The actual words of scripture held up against what history's done with our scripture don't jive. It's mind-boggling how effective the double-use of scripture's become, but I never really had to see it. And that showed up in how I felt about people who actually are oppressed. I'm not proud of this. Other people's pain and suffering was a real shame, and I'd help when I could, mostly during business hours and in ways that shielded me from any real investment in another person. I don't talk about learning to pat myself on the back or to claim I'm a better Christian than anyone else. But I am a better Christian than I was before because I can no longer hide my soul behind the distance afforded by strictly intellectual engagement.

Scripture's more real, more tangible now. When I read the awful accounts of unjust rulers in scripture, I don't have to imagine what they're like. I don't have to analyze the cultural and historical contexts to feel what a tyrannical king is like. I don't have to imagine what enemies wagging their tongues and hissing their curses at me is like. I know it. I'm living it. We all are. And I'm realizing, slowly, just how real all of this's been for so many people for so long. People of color've been trying to tell us what our beloved nation's done to them since our founding, and rather than listen, our country's been more likely to respond with violence, dehumanization, and death. And those in power've had the gaul to use scripture to defend themselves from oppression they wrongly claim as their own.

Now, I didn't have the most radical influences growing up, but I was raised with some inspiring ideals. I grew up with "give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses." I grew up with "liberty and justice for all." I grew up with "the land of the free," "never again," and "it could never happen here." I grew up with "don't believe everything you see on TV" and "those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it." I grew up with "love your neighbor," "do unto others as you would have them do unto you," and all those "blessed are's" we just heard. That's what I grew up with, hearing those ideals from parents, preachers, teachers, news anchors, poets, singers, all kinds of influential people. No wonder there's so much anger when those same people turn it all around and suppress people striving to see those ideals become reality. Maybe this is still too academic. Here's what "liberty and justice for all" looks like now.

The Underground Railroad's been resurrected. Those of us who carry a ping of pride living so close to Peterboro outta consider if the historical heroics of that network have any bearing on us now. Human beings with legal documents are taken. Families are split up. Grandparents and children are hunted. And those in power would have us believe that as long as everyone gets rounded up, no one should be afraid. The version of our homeland we grew up with either no longer exists or has just dropped any pretense it hid behind previously. Even when justice and progress's been won, it's come at great cost. Assassinations, bombings, stolen land, stolen people, lynchings, executions at the hands of the state, the wealthy, and the privileged. Much of what we're seeing is new, make no mistake, but not all of it is. Some's just newly flaunted. They've gone well beyond the immigrants and trans folks we were initially warned about. Nine states want to drop their obligation

to take care of the disabled. Same-sex marriage is under attack. Colleges are canceling Women's and Gender Studies programs. Childless couples are coming under the microscope. Native Americans are detained by ICE, including some that live in Canada. ICE is buying warehouses, which are almost certainly going to be retooled as concentration camps.

Now, a quick word about that last bit. The Holocaust's colored our understanding of what a concentration camp is, but concentration camps existed long before Hitler. The first time the word was used was in the Ten Years War between Cuba and Spain in the 1860s and '70s. Encyclopedia Britannica provides this lengthy definition: a concentration camp is "an internment center for political prisoners and members of national or minority groups ... confined for reasons of state security, exploitation, or punishment, usually by executive decree or military order ... often on the basis of identification with a particular group rather than as individuals and without benefit either of indictment or fair trial." The United States used concentration camps with at least five distinct populations in our history, from Native American tribes in the 19th and 20th Centuries to Japanese Americans during World War II. Hitler didn't invent the concentration camp, but he did start using them in 1933. Of the roughly one million who died in concentration camps, most died from disease or starvation, which the Nazis used as plausible deniability as if death is just something that happens, nevermind the neglect and torment that made those people sick and starving to begin with. The purpose-built machinery of the extermination camps came later. The Nazis were proud of their concentration camps. They tried to keep the extermination camps secret. It was 1939 when the Nazis began euthanizing people, as they called it, and 1941 when the "Final Solution" went into effect. They had 6 to 9 years of concentration camps before the extermination camps rose. When people talk about concentration camps now, you need to know the difference. Concentration camps are not extermination camps, but they lead to extermination camps. This is why we're trying so hard to stop the progression. People die in custody now, but the gas chambers, the ovens, the mass graves -- far as we know -- haven't reached us yet. This isn't fear mongering. This is reality, and THIS is the kind of oppression our scriptures so clearly decry so often.

I know some of y'all are tired of listening to this kind of talk. It's exhausting. Trust me, I know. It's exhausting to face down evil every day, but facing down evil's part of why we exist. We've just been privileged enough not to have to for a mighty long time. Now that evil is so obviously here, it's uncomfortable to acknowledge what we once believed, what people we once admired do, what parties we supported inflict, what neighbors and allies think, what lofty ideals our country failed to achieve...it's exhausting when the scales fall from our eyes to see what the world really is, but exhaustion cannot lead us to inaction. Coming face to face with evil must lead us to an unflinching commitment to the truth about who is oppressed. That's the work of so many Biblical prophets. That's who the "blessed are's" prioritize. And it's to them -- not the empire, not our national myths, not today's bastardized version of so-called "truth" -- it's to them we go. To the oppressed, the actually oppressed. This isn't new. This's where God's been calling us for millennia. It's about time we answer.